



THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY  
WASHINGTON DC 20350-1000

APR 09 2019

From: Secretary of the Navy  
To: Commander Bryce Benson, USN

Subj: SECRETARIAL LETTER OF CENSURE

Ref: (a) 10 U.S.C. Section 8167  
(b) U.S. Navy Regulations, 1990  
(c) The Charge of Command  
(d) Manual of the Judge Advocate General (JAGMAN) 0114a

1. On June 17, 2017, USS FITZGERALD (DDG 62) was severely damaged in a collision at sea with ACX CRYSTAL, resulting in the death of seven United States Navy Sailors. As the FITZGERALD Commanding Officer, your ineffective leadership and poor judgment were causal factors in the collision.

2. Per references (a) through (c), you were entrusted with the lives of the men and women in FITZGERALD. When you accepted command-at-sea, you accepted this extraordinary responsibility with full knowledge and understanding of its consequences. Despite this great obligation, you failed to meet the most basic responsibilities of a Commanding Officer at sea: the safe navigation of your ship and the safety of your crew. Immediately preceding the collision, you went to your cabin, leaving an inexperienced watch team, lacking in confidence, and technical competence. In doing so, you disengaged and removed yourself from the tactical control and supervision of your ship - while operating at night, in close proximity to land, and in an area with a high volume of maritime traffic. Your lack of presence on the bridge in a challenging operating environment, combined with the inexperience, incompetency and lack of cohesion of your watch team - a watch team that you approved - failed to meet your obligations as Commanding Officer. You further aggravated your poor decisions by failing to implement any mitigation measures, such as ordering the Executive Officer or Navigator to supervise the team on the bridge in your absence.

3. Your failure is not limited to the time immediately preceding the collision. As the Commanding Officer, you were singularly responsible for assessing and balancing risk. For the entirety of the time you served as the FITZGERALD Commanding Officer, you abrogated your responsibility to prepare your ship and crew for their assigned mission. Instead, you fostered a command characterized by complacency, lack of procedural compliance, weak system knowledge, and a dangerous level of informality. On the day of the collision, you failed to approve an adequate watch bill that managed the fatigue of your watch standers, failed to revise standing orders or procedures to account for the operational circumstances and degraded equipment, and authorized a poorly designed navigational track that included transiting faster than safe speed in a heavily trafficked area.

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4. Navy Regulations enshrines the concepts of command responsibility, authority, and accountability. Those regulations state the responsibility of the Commanding Officer is absolute. That standard, consistently assigned and willingly accepted by those officers we entrust with command-at-sea, makes your responsibility for this collision and the tragic deaths of our Sailors clear and unequivocal. Every day in command tests the character and professional competence of those officers we entrust with this most sacred duty. Your poor judgment and professional incompetence proved you unworthy of that trust.

5. Accordingly, you are administratively censured. A copy of this letter will be placed in your official service record per reference (d).

6. Within 15 days of the receipt of this letter, you may forward a rebuttal, consistent with reference (d), for inclusion in your official record, if you so desire.



Richard V. Spencer